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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000453

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION HOLDS CONGRESS, MILINKEVICH STEPS DOWN
FROM LEADERSHIP

REF: A. MINSK 424

[1](#)B. MINSK 440

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) The opposition's May 26-27 democratic congress was filled with debate and accusations, but the nearly 600 attending delegates from all around the country reaffirmed their commitment to work together in their struggle for freedom. The highlight of the event was former coalition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich's public and firm refusal to take part in a co-chairmanship leadership structure with the opposition party leaders. We also observed a noticeable split between pro-democracy communists and nationalists. However, the delegates overwhelmingly passed a common action plan, constitution, and economic strategy. End summary.

A Congress More or Less United...

[1](#)2. (C) On May 26-27, Ambassador and Poloffs observed the Congress of Pro-democracy Forces of Belarus at the GOB-owned Minsk Automobile Factory in Minsk. Despite a boycott by the local chapters of the opposition Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Gramada" (BSDP), United Civic Party (UCP), and youth organization Malady Front in the eastern region of Mogilyov, 568 out of a possible 916 representatives of Belarus' opposition coalition attended. The participants almost unanimously adopted a common action plan, five-part "Little Constitution" (Mala Konstitutsiya) for a democratic Belarus. Moreover, the pro-democratic forces embraced a common economic strategy calling for gradually reducing the GOB's economic role, ending state monopolies, and developing a market economy.

...While Forming Factions

[1](#)3. (C) Despite the overall unity, some divisions remain. For example, former coalition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich, as we expected, actively participated but reaffirmed that he would not take part in the coalition's collective executive council established by the congress (ref A). Moreover, the pro-democratic forces also reorganized themselves into eight "factions" more or less along party and civil society NGO lines: Regions for Freedom (201 delegates); Belarusian Party of Communists (124 delegates); UCP Civil Action (119 delegates); Party BPF (98 delegates); Union of Labor (95 delegates); BSDP Justice and Solidarity Belarus (94 delegates); European Coalition (50 delegates); Party of

Freedom and Progress (28 delegates).

¶4. (C) However, the opposition representatives did not specify the function of such factions beyond the congress, and some of the factions, such as Milinkevich's "For Freedom" movement and recently released political prisoner Nikolay Statkevich's European Coalition, will likely act as one. (Note: Statkevich is closely aligned with fellow former prisoner and MF founder Pavel Severinets, who will coordinate MF cooperation in "For Freedom." End note.)

And Revealing Friction between Communists and Nationalists

¶5. (C) Throughout the congress, there were heated moments that revealed friction between the opposition Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC) and its coalition partners. During the first hour, Statkevich and Severinets attempted to introduce a new coalition "action strategy" based on "European values" and more aggressive street action. Just before the Congress narrowly voted down this strategy and after a BPC deputy was deposed from the meeting's chairmanship, BPC Chair Sergey Kalyakin angrily speculated that the BKGB may have released Statkevich and Severinets just days earlier to create such a disruption of the congress' agenda (ref B).

¶6. (C) Moreover, after speeches by Russian opposition party leaders whom Kalyakin reportedly invited to the congress, UCP Deputy Chair Lyudmila Gryaznova gave an emotional speech that called upon the opposition to defend Belarus' independence and Western (non-Russian) orientation and drew heavy applause from BPF and MF Milinkevich supporters. Seeking to smooth out differences, UCP Chair Anatoliy Lebedko praised the collective leadership strongly supported by him, Kalyakin,

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and BSDP Acting Chair Anatoliy Levkovich as being consistent with European values. Lebedko reminded delegates that the first, middle, and last name of the true single leader in the coalition is the "United Democratic Forces," and not a particular person.

Comment

¶7. (C) Despite the repeated delays and debates regarding the congress' agenda and date, the congress' organizers and participants conducted their meetings in a relatively smooth manner. Also noteworthy, the regime followed through on its assurances that it would not prevent or obstruct the event.

¶8. (C) Although Milinkevich pulled out of the leadership, it appears that he and his movement will continue cooperating with his coalition partners. Indeed, since the conclusion of the March 2006 presidential elections, the opposition coalition has been without a genuine leader. Milinkevich showed little ability to lead and the party leaders showed little interest in following a former NGO activist. The key challenge for the coalition's leadership is to implement its ambitious action plan, which includes organizing a series of joint street demonstrations and establishing a dialogue with the political and economic elite, with broad participation by all coalition parties and organizations.

Stewart